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CHAPTER

31

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Russian anti-Semites believed that Jews threatened the well-being and stability of Russia because they engaged in capitalist exploitation of non-Jews, subverted the political order by participating in the revolutionary movement, and embraced a religion intent on promoting Jewry's domination of the world.[1] Although scholars have explored Russian anti-Semitism in terms of policies, activities, and the printed word both before and after the revolutionary divide of 1917, they have devoted less attention to visual depictions of Jews and Judaism. Pictorial representations of Jehovah published in the Soviet Union during the 1920s, as we will see, supplement what we already know about the history of anti-Semitism in Russia.

The images examined here come from a periodical titled *The Godless at the Workbench* (*Bezbozhnik u stanka*), published jointly by the Moscow branch of the Communist Party and the Moscow Society of the Godless during the 1920s. Its purpose was to undermine religion's hold on Soviet citizens, and the articles and pictures in *The Godless at the Workbench* provided communist activists with the material needed to promote atheism and secular values among the populace.[2] Along with coercion and repression, antireligious activists used a combination of visual and textual approaches to undermine the hold that Judaism had on most of the nearly two and a half million Jews then living under Soviet power. From the perspective of the communist regime, the production and use of visual images that promoted secular values were an integral part of its broader project to build a socialist culture and society. The message was straightforward: Judaism helped to exploit the vast majority of Jews (who were poor) by serving the interests of the Jewish bourgeoisie. Religion and capitalism worked in tandem to ensure the Jewish bourgeoisie's stranglehold on Jewish society.

The depictions of Jehovah that appeared in *The Godless at the Workbench* tended to draw upon a stock repertoire. The publishers and artists of the journal did not shy away from using grotesque caricatures and traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes to deliver their message. The drawings that appeared in *The Godless at the Workbench* turned Jehovah into a monster and marked Judaism and its adherents as enemies of the socialist revolution. Artists used physiognomy and clothing to convey the message. Certain articles of clothing served as markers of class and religiosity, and even body type was significant. Jewish capitalists, for example, were drawn with tuxedos, spats, big noses, and self-satisfied, overweight countenances. In some drawings the artists depicted the Jewish bourgeoisie as religious Jews: they wear sidelocks,

skullcaps, prayer shawls, and phylacteries.[3] Still other drawings underscored the artists' belief in the connection—perhaps a biological link—between Judaism and capitalism. In figure 31.1, Jehovah appears pregnant with a fat-cat capitalist holding two bags of money.

In figure 31.2 (color section) a religious Jewish industrialist prays to a one-eyed Jehovah, who appears as a heavenly visage emanating from the smokestacks of the factories in the background (his name is spelled backwards in Cyrillic in a reference to the fact that Hebrew is written right to left). In this cartoon Jehovah is making the sign of the Priestly Benediction. This suggests that the Jewish bourgeoisie have agreed to worship Jehovah in exchange for protection and status as the chosen people. The caption is drawn from biblical passages that refer to Jehovah's selection of the Jews as the chosen people and Jehovah's promise to help defend them (Deut. 6:3 and 7:6–7 and 24, and Lev. 26:12). Elsewhere in *The Godless at the Workbench,* captions accompanying depictions of Jehovah were taken from the Hebrew Scriptures to underscore how the foundational text of Judaism legitimated the behavior of capitalist Jews who acted against the interests of the Jewish proletariat. In this illustration, the covenant between Jehovah and the Jewish bourgeoisie allows the industrialist to vanquish the downtrodden, barefoot Jewish worker.

It is difficult to ascertain either how readers may have understood such images or what the artists of the drawings intended. Symbols and images may lose their effectiveness if their messages are arcane or opaque. At the same time they can be especially effective if their meanings are ambiguous and subject to multiple interpretations. The general message of these drawings may have been relatively easy to understand to the informed eye, but not all features of these drawings were easily parsed. One function of political art is to provide a visual script designed to lead to new modes of thinking and behavior. Yet no matter how powerful and persuasive these images may be, no matter how deftly they incorporate popular mythologies, viewers' responses can be unpredictable because visual representations are open to diverse readings. The absence of explanatory text that could help decode and demystify the drawings' imagery enhanced the likelihood that the typical readers of *The Godless at the Workbench* would interpret what they saw with the cultural repertoires available to them. The artists of these drawings could select freely from the vast repository of visual imagery in Russian religious, political, and folk culture, although there is no way to tell whether their audiences took away with them the message intended by the artists.

The representations of a one-eyed Jehovah are a case in point. Depicting the Jewish god with a single eye, as in figures 31.1 and 31.2, makes several allusions; what the artists had in mind and how readers interpreted the images are difficult to know with certainty. Russian icon painters depicted the Great Eye (*velikii glaz*) on icons and wrote the word "God" underneath as a way to capture the viewer's attention.[4] Yet religious images and texts in Russian Orthodoxy were supposed to be open to multiple messages. The single eye could, for instance, refer to the all-seeing and all-knowing Jehovah who watches over the Jews. Since the Jewish god has no physical manifestation, the single eye may therefore represent the unity that Jehovah supposedly embodies. Moreover, on tombstones in Jewish cemeteries and in some European synagogues the depiction of a single eye referred to Jehovah's keeping a watchful eye on his flock.

But the single eye could also be an expression of the evil eye. Russian popular culture was

31.1. *Jehovah.* Anti-Semitic cartoon from *The Godless at the Workbench* (1923).

rich with such imagery, and the single eye may have represented the artists' belief that adherents of Judaism wished the worst for the communist regime. The single eye could also allude to the purported association between Jews and Freemasonry, a movement organized in secret societies, that emerged during the eighteenth century and was rooted in Enlightenment ideals. One familiar symbol of the Freemasons was the single eye, best known to Americans as the one in the pyramid on the back of the one-dollar bill. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both conservative political forces and anti-Semites fostered a belief in a worldwide Judeo-Masonic conspiracy. Opponents of the Freemasons claimed that Freemasons were disguised Jews who worshipped the devil in the form of a goat. Such a belief enjoyed common currency in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, and some of Russia's educated public undoubtedly shared this sentiment. After 1917 enemies of the communist regime condemned the supposed Judeo-Masonic conspiracy as the cause of the upheaval that had engulfed Russia.

Figure 31.3 (color section) offers a different depiction of Jehovah. Although this Jehovah has one eye like the others, his physiognomy is unusual in other ways, too. A worker, easily identified as such by his boots, cap, and jacket, draws open a curtain, revealing the inside of a synagogue where Jews wearing prayer shawls are genuflecting below the image of a goat's head labeled "Jehovah" (rotate the image 90 degrees to the right to see the goat from another perspective). The Jewish god wears a top hat emblazoned with a double-headed eagle, the seal of the Romanov dynasty. "God" possesses a single eye and a nose similar to a closed fist with the thumb sticking through the second and third digits. Lightning bolts emanate from around the goat's head and hurtle toward the congregants. The caption reads, "Now is the time to clear away the fog that the bourgeoisie set upon us. Down with this bastard of a religion."

What are we to make of Jehovah's resemblance to a goat's head with a fist as a nose? Since medieval times Christian Europe had associated Jews with goats, which were also known as the devil's favorite animal. These associations still enjoyed common currency in early twentieth-century Russia. The presence of a single eye dominating the goat's head might have prompted the viewer to conclude that Jews and Freemasons were one and the same, jointly responsible for evil in the world. In addition, the goat's snout draws upon the long-standing stereotype of Jews as having large noses, and the thumb sticking through the fist resembles the *mano in fica* (the "fig" hand), a gesture commonly employed in Europe to ward off the evil eye. But giving someone "the fig" is also an insulting, if not obscene, gesture. It is equivalent to telling someone to "get lost," but in some contexts it may mean "fuck you," or serve as an obscene sexual invitation, or refer crudely to female genitalia. Undoubtedly, the various meanings of the mano in fica would not have been lost on most Russians, for the gesture enjoyed currency among the general populace. In short, the drawing portrays a cynical and deceitful Jehovah thumbing his nose at his loyal flock of worshippers.

It is impossible to ascertain whether someone looking at figure 31.3 would have deciphered the connection between Jehovah and evil in such literal terms. But the message of this drawing and the other images explored in this essay drew its sustenance from the multiple readings that visual representations of Jehovah could elicit. At the very least, viewers of these illustrations would have been exposed to bizarre and grotesque images of Jehovah that relied on folkloric, cultural, religious, and political traditions of Russian society and that reinforced stereotypes

and prejudices already in place. Moreover, the depiction of a monstrous Jehovah paralleled depictions of the revolution's alleged opponents in Soviet political posters, where so-called enemies of the people were frequently rendered as bloodthirsty monsters engaged in heinous crimes against the world's first socialist society.

Ironically, the depictions of Jehovah in *The Godless at the Workbench* may have subverted the regime's effort to undermine anti-Semitism: they may have fostered suspicion of all Soviet Jews, not just the bourgeois exploiters. Despite the communist authorities' policy of combating anti-Semitism in the 1920s, illustrations such as the ones presented here may have not improved relations between Jews and non-Jews. Indeed, they may have helped keep alive anti-Jewish prejudices The drawings of Jehovah in *The Godless at the Workbench* did not try to sever the distinction between antireligious activity and anti-Semitic diatribe. Consequently, the artists who drew for the journal may have unwittingly nurtured the survival of anti-Jewish sentiments among the Soviet populace.

NOTES—1. On Soviet anti-Semitism, see Zvi Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present,* 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Nora Levin, *The Jews in the Soviet Union since 1917: Paradox of Survival* (New York: New York University Press, 1988); Yaacov Ro'i, ed., *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Essex, England: Frank Cass, 1995).

2. On the Soviet campaign against Judaism, see note 1; and Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

3. Observant Jews are enjoined from shaving their facial hair and often grow long curls along the side of their faces. Two phylacteries—small leather cases containing pieces of paper with passages from the Hebrew Scriptures— are worn during morning prayers.

4. Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 42, 159; and Boris Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon,* ed. Stephen Rudy (Lisse, Belgium: Peter de Ridder Press, 1976), 39.